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20 November 1979

STATEMENT BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND,  
RT HON HUMPHREY ATKINS MP

The publication of this Working Paper marks a significant change of emphasis in the approach of HMG to the political situation in Northern Ireland. Together with the Conference for which it has been published, it amounts to the first substantive attempt to make political progress in Northern Ireland since 1975.

Direct rule in its present form is not a satisfactory basis for the continued government of Northern Ireland. It is the Government's firm objective to find an acceptable way to transfer substantial responsibilities back to local hands. The purpose of the Conference is to discover what the highest level of agreement is on such a transfer of powers. The Working Paper provides the raw material out of which new arrangements can be created.

The Working Paper speaks largely for itself. But it may be worth drawing attention to three points:

- (i) The Working Paper and the Conference are not about whether or not Northern Ireland should remain part of the UK. (There is already statutory provision for border polls on that question). They are about how powers might be transferred to elected representatives in Northern Ireland - against a background that Northern Ireland will stay within the United Kingdom for the foreseeable future.
- (ii) Running through the Working Paper is the Government's firm belief that any new arrangements for the government of Northern Ireland must be acceptable to both sides of the community. Experience has shown that it would be folly to

try to operate a system of government that does not have the support of a substantial body of opinion in Northern Ireland from both sides of the community. It would not work. That is an inescapable lesson of the past ten years.

- (iii) The document is what it claims to be on its cover: a Working Paper for a Conference. It concentrates on setting out the key issues with which the Conference will have to grapple - the nitty-gritty of arrangements for government.

The real issues are:

- (a) the kind of institutions that might be created;
- (b) the subjects and powers that might be transferred;
- (c) the arrangements that might be made to look after minority interests.

Paragraphs 9-38 of the document lay out for inspection the wide range of choice available in those three areas. And Appendix A puts on show, in the form of outline models, a few illustrations of how the various elements might be combined to construct different systems of government.

I must make it clear that HMG has no secret preference for one model over any other. I shall not be covertly trying to steer the Conference in one particular direction. What I shall be doing is identifying those elements where there is already agreement between the parties, and then trying to achieve agreement on whatever others are needed to build up a complete model. In deciding what form that model should take, I shall be taking my cue from the Conference itself - following the route likely to lead to agreement.

We are not, to use a tailoring metaphor, looking for an off-the-peg arrangement. We are looking for one that is made to measure for the particular political and practical needs and circumstances of Northern Ireland. The Working Paper is an attempt to provide the raw material - the kinds of cloth and a pattern-book of designs. Then the Conference will have to work out which materials are chosen and

how they are cut.

I end by emphasising that the Government means business. We are looking for the highest level of agreement from the Parties. In the light of whatever agreement the Conference is able to reach, the Government will decide what proposals it should put to Parliament.

I want to say one thing more. Neither the Working Paper nor the Conference will be of the smallest interest to the terrorists. They do not want to see better government, they want to destroy democratic government. Indeed their fear of progress may lead them to step up the level of violence in an effort to impede our search for agreement.

The security forces will continue to maintain their high level of activity over the coming weeks and it is only sensible for all of us to keep our eyes particularly wide open and to give every help possible to those who are trying to protect lives and property.

We must not allow a gang of terrorists to frustrate our efforts to seek a way ahead.